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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ASHGABAT 000031

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR SCA/CEN; DRL/IRF

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/06/2020

TAGS: [KIRF](#) [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [TX](#)

SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: BAPTIST CHURCH REMAINS ACTIVE
DESPITE RESTRICTIONS

REF: A. 09 ASHGABAT 337

[1](#)B. 09 ASHGABAT 1642

Classified By: Charge Sylvia Reed Curran, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: The Baptist church in Ashgabat held Christmas services last month at which it distributed a large number of Turkmen language Bibles. Despite occasional access to religious literature such as these Bibles, officials continue to target church members upon arrival at the airport, seizing Bibles and digital media. Obtaining official approval for religious literature remains limited and highly selective. Although government officials regularly monitor the church, it continues to push the envelope through activities like the Bible distribution and holding unapproved summer camps for children. Government attention seems focused on ethnic Turkmen participation at the church, and the pastor believes there is a government "islamization" policy that could lead to a legal prohibition on conversions to Christianity. END SUMMARY.

[1](#)2. (C) On January 5, poloff met with Pastor Vasiliy Korobov of the registered Evangelical Christian Baptist Church of Turkmenistan to discuss the church's activities. Korobov described recent Christmas events, which included a small church service on December 25 and a much larger service with about 100 participants on December 27, at which "there was not an empty seat in the church." The December 27 service attracted a lot of children, each of whom received substantial bags of candy, school supplies and, for Turkmen-speaking children, Bibles printed in Turkmen. There were not any Russian-language Bibles available. The church had called the local Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and asked to buy Bibles. The ROC agreed, but when the Baptists asked for 20 copies, the ROC said only two copies were available. Korobov thought the ROC was being cautious because their telephone conversation could be monitored.

[1](#)3. (C) During the meeting with poloff, Korobov had a couple dozen Turkmen Bibles on a table in his office at the church. The title page indicated they were printed in Istanbul in [1](#)1997. The pastor was vague about where the church had managed to obtain such a large quantity of Bibles, first suggesting that they had been stored in cellars and moved

around a lot, as evidenced by the worn appearance of the covers. Later in the conversation, when talking about a conference that he had attended in Turkey this fall, the pastor alluded to discussions that had taken place to ship the Bibles from Turkey to Turkmenistan. Korobov said it is better if printed materials show an old publication date because, once in the country, if they are inspected or seized, it is possible to argue that they entered the country before current restrictions were in force. Otherwise, it is difficult to explain how they entered the country legally.

14. (C) Korobov described the special screening the he and other church members are subjected to at the airport upon return from foreign travel. He explained that the membership list submitted when the church registered was passed to the Migration Service and the names were entered in the system so that they are identified as church members to airport officials. Even personal Bibles are seized. Korobov recounted the experience of one church member who attended conferences in Istanbul and Bishkek during the fall. Both times his personal Bible was seized upon return. Korobov noted that Customs officials do not inspect baggage when departing so there is no way to prove that the Bibles were already in Turkmenistan and not new material. While Korobov suggested that declaring Bibles on departure might be a solution, it struck him as perhaps acknowledging that it is somehow forbidden to possess even one copy. His own computer was seized and, when returned, the drive had been wiped clean. Flash drives are seized immediately. According to Korobov, all materials related to religion are treated as

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"sensitive and a sore subject."

15. (C) Further on religious literature, the pastor explained that the church does not maintain a library with books openly on display. In order to avoid possible seizure if government officials conducted an inspection, each book would need certification and a stamp from the State Council on Religious Affairs (CRA). Otherwise, the book would be considered "not approved," and automatically become illegal. Such books would be seized for checking, but Korobov felt subsequent approval would never be given. If the church submitted books to the CRA for approval, the CRA would only approve a quantity corresponding to the number of members listed at the time the group registered. It would not allow the church to have enough copies to distribute freely to anyone who was interested.

16. (C) Concerning the problems faced recently by the unregistered Baptist group in Dashoguz (Ref B), Korobov, who knows the leaders of that group well, said rather than pursue separate registration, the Dashoguz group could receive permission to meet as a branch of the registered Ashgabat Baptist church. Korobov said he has told the leader of the Dashoguz Baptists that being registered is not especially advantageous and generates its own problems such as opening a bank account, tax filings and inspections. Korobov said he was ready to submit documentation for the Dashoguz group to exist as a branch of the Ashgabat church and he did not know why the Dashoguz Baptists did not pursue this approach. Korobov also said he was willing to submit documentation for three unregistered Baptist groups in Turkmenabat to become branches of the Ashgabat church.

17. (C) In general, the pastor said his church is able to operate without any problems. He said if there had been problems, he would have contacted the Embassy. He felt that the government treats the church carefully because it is aware of the church's contacts with the Embassy. As an example, he described an incident in July 2009 when the church held a children's "summer camp." On the second day of the event, two officials from the mayor's office and the security ministry came to the church, asking why Korobov had not informed the CRA about the event. Korobov told poloff

that he had not informed the CRA because they would not have approved it. Instead of taking Korobov away for questioning, the officials conducted an interview on site, asking for copies of permission slips from the parents and a detailed description of the activities. The officials especially wanted to know if the children were taught any kind of "program." The officials wrote up a protocol, which Korobov signed, and the church was allowed to continue with the event.

18. (C) Korobov said government officials periodically attend church services for purposes of monitoring. According to their work plan, they have to regularly attend, listen and report. They are most interested to know how many ethnic Turkmen attend the church and, according to Korobov, the officials do not want them to attend. There were also a couple of cases of individuals becoming active in the church who later turned out to be government informers. Despite the occasional monitoring and informers, the pastor said it is peaceful inside the church building itself, and that problems only arise outside. Korobov did not acknowledge that the church conducts organized proselytization, but he remarked that while one could not last for 15 minutes openly distributing literature in a public place, there is no way for the government to monitor private conversations. Korobov remarked on a process of "islamization" encouraged by the government. He cited increased attendance at mosques and active promotion of Muslim holidays, including government sponsored meals at mosques. He felt that in the future there will be a law prohibiting Muslims from converting to Christianity, saying there is already talk of such a law. (COMMENT: Catholic priests here have been told unofficially by government officials that they may proselytize to those,

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regardless of religious background, who are not ethnic Turkmen. END COMMENT.)

19. (C) COMMENT: While obtaining religious literature remains a critical problem, the presence of so many Turkmen language Bibles at the church suggests that the group can be quite resourceful when presented with an opportunity. It's not clear why the Baptist groups in Dashoguz and Turkmenabat would not be interested in affiliation with the Ashgabat church since that would allow them to gather legally and openly, avoiding raids such as took place before Christmas (Ref B). If the Baptists find a way to work together and affiliate, they could perhaps avoid some of the problems that have faced the unregistered groups to date. END COMMENT
CURRAN